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Live music as ideology

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ABSTRACT

The current crisis within the recording sector has been accompanied by an apparent boom in live music. In 2008 and 2009 the economic value of live music in the UK exceeded that of recorded music and the gap appears to be growing. While such trends have been commented upon in numerous places, what has been less common is to examine the ways in which the accompanying discourse around live music has held it to be the popular music experience. Where once consumers were told that hi-fis were the best way to experience music, now the uniqueness of being there is stressed by promoters keen to maximise profits. Based on research carried out in the UK between 2008 and 2011, this paper examines the implications of these changes. It suggests that the rise of live music has been accompanied by an ideology which has sought to re-define the definitive musical experience and speculates about the implication of this for musicians and fans alike.

KEYWORDS: live music; ideology; promoters; fans.

Introduction

I want to begin this paper with a bit of context. It is born out of a project which was funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council entitled: *The promotion of live music in the UK: An historical, cultural and institutional analysis*. The project began in April 2008 and finished in April 2011 and in addition to myself included Matt Brennan, Simon Frith and Emma Webster; all of whom have contributed in various ways to this paper.

The project had its origins in an earlier project which Simon and I, along with another colleague, John Williamson, were involved in in 2002, which sought to "map" the value of the music industry in Scotland. One of the findings of that report was that live music in Scotland was economically dominant, in reasonably robust health and far more important than the recording sector.

This finding came at a time when media and some academic accounts of "the music industry" routinely assumed that this meant the recording industry. From our Scottish point of view this made no sense. So John and I wrote an article in which we questioned the very term "music industry" and suggested that we move to the term "music industries" plural (Williamson and Cloonan 2007).

Our experience in writing the mapping report also increased our interest in what might broadly be called the political economy of live music. We became convinced that examining popular music history through the prism of live music would make the world seem like a very different place, and indeed it did. And you can read more about that in the three-volume history of live music in the UK which will emerge from the project.

In the rest of this paper I want to say a little more about the project, then look at the ideology of concert promoters and in particular their notions of risk taking and what it is they think they are selling. And I'll conclude with a few remarks on what I think the importance of all this is.

THE PROJECT

Moving on to the project itself, again a bit of contextualisation is useful. Putting it bluntly, our timing was perfect. The research took place at a time when live music was in ascendancy. As noted before we began in April 2008 and in 2009 PRS For Music reported that for the first time in living memory the value of live music in the UK in that year exceeded the value of recorded music (Page and Carey 2009). The following year the same organisation reported that the gap had widened in 2009 (Page and Carey 2010).

Now there are lots of caveats to the figures and some evidence that live might also be suffering. It should also be born in mind that the figures mask great discrepancy with the so-called "boom" in live music being largely driven by a handful of top, largely "heritage", acts. Nevertheless there is some evidence that live music is economically dominant and that the economic dominance of the recording sector is a thing of the past and unlikely to return.

Meanwhile a key figure in our research was the concert promoter, those people responsible for putting on gigs. We sought to understand the live music industry through the prism of the promoter and interviewed around one hundred of them, ranging from people who put on gigs in their local pub up to the head of Live Nation in the UK and Harvey Goldsmith, the best known promoter in the UK and best known for staging Live Aid.

Now I want to draw upon Marx's idea in the German ideology that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" and I want to suggest that

the economic reports I've just quoted show promoters are the new ruling class in the music industries. So that if you want to understand something about the state of the contemporary music industries, then understanding the worldviews of concerts promoters is a pretty good place to start. In case you are not convinced by this, consider the fact that the most important music company in the world now is not a major label, but Live Nation Entertainment – an amalgamation of the world's biggest concert promoter, Live Nation, and the world's biggest ticket agent, Ticket-master¹. There is lots to say about Live Nation, but I'll stop there and move on to the ideology of live music.

IDEOLOGY AND PROMOTERS

First it is important to note that promoters cannot simply be lumped in together. In fact our research suggested that we can think of three types of promoter – enthusiasts who just put on acts they like (whether for profit or not), professionals who put on acts in order to make a living and governmental who put on acts in order to fulfil certain government policies. This division is of necessity a little crude but it is true to say that a promoter's position and motivation will affect their worldview. Nevertheless, they all face common problems – getting an act, venue, setting the price (always a very risky business), selling tickets and producing the event. In thinking through how to deal with these issues, a certain worldview emerges and it is this that I want to explore.

Here I want to use the term "ideology" in the sense of encapsulating the promoter's worldview. I am *not* suggesting that this worldview is some sort of objective reality, more that if we want to understand the music industries in 2011 then we need to understand that worldview.

Meanwhile I would also note that one of the things that characterises promoters is the amount of people they have to deal with – artists and/or their representatives, venues, ticket sellers, advertisers, audiences, regulators, etc. All of these people have the potential to ruin the promoter's plans and they are laden with risk, of which more in a moment. During our interviews with promoters they had a number of comments about such interactions but I want to limit my discussion to two aspects of promoters' view – their perceptions of themselves as risk takers and what they think they are selling.

TAKING RISKS

In order to understand promoters' views of themselves it is useful again to think of how many people promoters interact with. If they book artists, venues, advertising and then produce the show there is risk in every step. Above all there is the risk that the audience simply won't come.

Our work was partly historical and so that context is needed. Here we were repeatedly told that the concert promoting business is becoming riskier. We were told that back in the 1960s artists generally worked for a set fee but now always worked

for a percentage of the gross (Betesh 2010). Moreover, that percentage had shifted from something like 50/50 or better (in the promoter's favour) to more a norm of something like 85/15 or 90/10 in the artist's favour. One promoter said that the industry margin was around -3/4% (Ellis 2011)², so this is a risky business in which margins are tight. And there is more competition now than in the 1960s (Betesh 2010).

Paul Latham (2009), the UK CEO of Live Nation, told us that one of the things that his colleague Barry Clayman,

has sleepless nights over now is how much you have to put on the line to guarantee. So when he was talking about 70/30, 75/25 deals, the fact now that they're 90% plus deals and the agents representing the acts are saying, oh by the way can you stick a few on the secondary market and make a few extra quid, and then can you guarantee it, so you get into a situation where you're putting everything on the table and guaranteeing it.

Promoters also said that bigger productions meant that artists often wanted more upfront in order to pay for stage design and construction (Boyd 2008) or for whatever reason (Latham 2009). Overall, they felt themselves to put under a number of pressures. As veteran promoter Danny Betesh (2010) put it to us:

A promoter's life is quite difficult, you got to be making sure when you're promoting, that you're getting it right more [...] a lot more than you're getting it wrong. 'Cause when you lose, you lose 100%, and when you make, you usually make 15%.

Similarly, Glasgow promoter Peter MacCalman (2009) told us that "promoting music's [...] quite a harsh game and it's difficult to do financially successful".

But the idea that promoter's are risk takers is an important part of their psychology. Giving evidence to a parliamentary enquiry into ticket touting, Rob Ballantine, chair of the promoters' collective body, the CPA, said simply: "We are risk takers" (*Culture, Media and Sport Committee* 2008, Ev. 22). In interview veteran promoter John Giddings said that his immediate predecessors were "all cowboys making it up [...] like the original frontiersmen" (Giddings 2010) while another older promoter, Jef Hanlon (2010) described the 1960s generation as "larger than life characters with lots of energy and fight".

On a more practical level Mark Mackie of Edinburgh promotions company Regular Music told us that taking a risk was one of the two things promoters were paid for, the other being to actually produce the show (Mackie 2008). Such was the risk in all this that promoters referred to themselves as gamblers, as the following quotes show:

It's a gamble, but you've got to be sure [...] you've really got to get it right six or seven times for every one time you get it wrong. (Betesh 2010)

Sheffield promoter Alan Deadman (2008) agreed that "it's a bit like gambling, it's a bit like an addiction".

In the same city Mark Hobson (2008) told us:

So yes, it is a financial gamble, and sometimes it's a white knuckle ride when there's a lot of money on the line, and you're looking at it, and you're looking at how many tickets you've sold, and you know what the fee is, and you're going, 'oh no!'.

Another Sheffield, promoter, Stuart Basford (2009), agreed that "you are gambling; you are almost a professional gambler, in that it's my money".

So the point became to minimise the gamble, as he continued: "You have to work out the finances of it and then gamble" (ibid.). Such a notion was pickled up by veteran promoter John Giddings (2010), who said:

I told someone the other day they were stupid for betting on horses. And they said, 'but you bet on people with two legs every day', which is so true. At least I think I know what I'm doing to an extent.

Nevertheless a certain frame of mind was required. According to Basford (2009):

I think you have got to have a gambling mentality, because you are – as I said to you – you are a gambler – I always say this – we are gamblers, really, 'cos there's money involved. It's not a bit of fun; it is a bit of fun but it's not [...] pleasure, really.

Back in Glasgow MacCalman (2009) was somewhat dismissive of the idea of promotion as gambling:

I think that if I want to gamble, I'll go and play cards; I'll go and play poker or something. That is gambling. Promotion's not *quite* gambling. Because I *like* games of chance actually, which is possibly like a lot of promoters anyway. I like poker... But then, it's one thing to gamble on a ten pound game of poker, it's another thing to gamble five thousand pound against a gig. And if you totally think it's a gamble, then I don't think that's a very healthy attitude to have with it. Also, then you're essentially gambling with people's careers and gambling with people's reputations. I take promotion much more seriously than a game of cards. And *actually*, something that may be why people maybe compare it is that actually the odds are maybe better in a game of cards than on a gig really, and how much money you make on gigs, proportionally. But nah nah, I wouldn't say that it's totally gambling.

MacCalman saw his job as being of "more intellectual than gambling", while the Director of Scottish Opera, Alex Reedijk (2009) denied that he was gambling

as that this implied being reckless when his job was "minding the shop on behalf of the audience of Scotland". Here the promoters who embraced the term "gambler" seemed to see it as glamorous while those who disliked it saw it as disreputable.

MINIMISING RISK

All the promoters could see that promotion involved risks and so they constructed way of ameliorating risk, especially in a context where if the deal gets to 90/10, then risks may not be proportionate to return (Marshall 2011). So we became aware of a number of ways of minimising risk. These might include:

- At the lower end shifting the burden to the artist and only allow bands on to your bills if they sell tickets.
- Co-promotions, especially with other promoters who had better local knowledge and a practice which dates back to at least the 1950s. The advantage is to spread the risk but this entails a loss of control and lower return.
- Get other revenue streams from the gig of which perhaps the most important at the moment is the kickback promoters get on booking fees (see *Competition Commission* 2009), but depending on what your relationship is with the venue, it might also include deals on the merchandise or on the bar takings. Of course, if you actually own the venue that can help and promoter Vince Power (2009) said that beer sales are "where the profit is. [...] That is what enabled me to pay [money]". In the case of Live Nation they may also try and own all the car parks in the areas surrounding their venues.

Another way of ameliorating risk was thinking long term, so that you get involved with an artist an early stage and hope they stay loyal. Here Edinburgh promoter Mark Mackie (2008) told us:

We work with a band like Glasvegas, right? Now those shows weren't all about this time, it's all about next time. It's all about what we'll do next time – you plan ahead. [...] So you're always thinking *next* time.

Similarly Geoff Ellis (2011), CEO of DF Concerts, who promotes Scotland's biggest festival – T in the Park – told us that "our philosophy with the festival isn't to squeeze it for every penny that we can, because it's about longevity".

There were also sound business practices such as trying to stop acts touring too much and not overpricing, two concerns which recurred in our work.

Then there are some more shady practices such as:

• Crushing the opposition: in Glasgow we were told that any new competition would be crushed, that promoters pull down others' posters and of a whispering campaign against a female-owned promotions company.

- Colluding with secondary ticket agents or selling tickets directly to touts. This is in fact a longstanding practice, with the difference now being that it is more overt and promoters will speak of selling a percentage of tickets to the secondary market, sometimes as a form "dynamic pricing".
- More overt dodginess of which we got told numerous tales (such as what happens at gigs where it is cash on the door, deducting from artists fees the price of promotional posters you haven't put up and so on).

Meanwhile, as self-perceived risk takers the promoters tended to have some disdain for those they perceived as not taking risk. Prime amongst these were agents who got their percentage regardless of how many ticket are sold. So veteran promoter Barrie Marshall (2011) told us:

The promoter takes the risk. And that's a big difference. And if you're taking the risk, the motivation to make sure it's successful is even higher then – it has to be. And you're at the point then where the theory isn't there; it's all about practice – you've got to make it work. You've got to sell the ticket, you've got to produce the show, you've got to deal with all the people that it takes to do that on all levels. That's the difference. And that is a pretty comprehensive responsibility.

Similarly the songwriters' collecting agency, PRS for Music, which has a 3% levy on concert tickets to pay the songwriters for the use of their songs, were dismissed by promoter Stuart Littlewood (2010) on the grounds that "they don't risk anything" and Jef Hanlon (2010) told us that he hated the touts who he saw as benefitting from the risks he was taking while taking none themselves.

So, to summarise this section, promoters see themselves as risk takers, even as gamblers, who take certain steps to ameliorate risk but nevertheless have a certain disdain for those they view as taking no risks. But the nature of the risk is mediated by the product that the promoters are trying to sell, and they had some views on that as well.

SELLING LIVE MUSIC

Unsurprisingly there was a feeling amongst our interviewees that what they are selling is something intangible – an experience. So Vince Power (2009) told us that "the value of the festival is in the person's head" and Graeme Howell (2010), Director of Bristol's Colston Hall, said: "What you're buying is access to an experience, that's what a ticket is". Moreover there was a feeling that in an age where everything was reproducible live music remained the ultimate un-reproducible experience. Of course this was at a point in history when live music is more routinized than ever and ever more mediated. Nevertheless the *ideology* of the un-replicable experience as clearly important to promoters. So Hayley Pearce (2008) promoter at the Thekla venue in Bristol told us:

You know, you can download music for free, you can download films for free, you can watch TV on the Internet, you can buy cheap booze in shops, you can have a home cinema at home; you can have all of that stuff in the comfort of your own home, but *watching* live performance on TV is nowhere near the same as being there.

Or as Paul Latham of Live Nation (2009) put it:

You can walk on this high street, down Oxford St, and you'll get band t-shirts [...] and it's the same for recording. You can now get it in so many forms, everything's ephemeral. Everything is disposable. [...] The only thing you can't replicate is you were there when that person you idolized was there. You shared that room, that breathing space, with that person. [...] I was there when [...].

For Peter MacCalman (2009) the value of live music to the audience is:

Because it's real. Access to the act. It's collective. And it's an experience, whereas your MP3 isn't: it's just disposable and it's just promotional rather than anything else nowadays. [...] It's always been surreal, recorded music, anyway, and a step removed from that. And people want the live thing. Always will.

Importantly, promoters frequently expressed feelings that seeing an artist live was the *definitive* popular music experience. So, reflecting on promoting the reformed Specials Paul Lathahm (2009) said:

That's what is live, having the circle at Manchester Apollo bounce, and the walls sweat, and 3,500 people with one voice singing 'Ghost Town', that you can never replicate. But that was live, and probably as raw as you're going to get.

Conal Dodds (2010) of the Metropolis promotions company told us that "you're never going to be able to replace the live experience of going to a concert". Comparing it to other experiences of live music Mark Mackie (2008) told us:

Thankfully for us, as promoters, concerts are shite on telly [...] it's different, it's not the same. So that live music experience that you can't replicate is what people are buying into. And that's what's built the industry, that's why it's so big.

For Paul McCartney's promoter, Barrie Marshall (2011):

The demand is still there, if the artist you're seeing is unique: Gaga, Pink, whatever it is. These are artists that people think: the only way I can really [...] first of all, I want to enjoy it and be a part of the experience, and secondly I want to give my adulation to them for what they've done and share it. And that is

unique: you can't get it on television, you can't even get it on the Internet. It doesn't work the same way, it's not the same.

For T in The Park promoter Geoff Ellis (2011):

The one thing I think we all know... Or I guess most people know... Is that you've got to offer something special, for people to want to come back; you're not just selling something off the shelf – we're selling experiences. I think that's something that people from the outside, looking in, might not get. I think the audiences get that, because they're not just buying a ticket to go and see a band performing on stage – it's the whole experience. And that's why the live is strong, because you can't download that experience; you can't buy a DVD or watch it online. Yeah, you can go and see a great gig, but it's not just about watching the band on stage – it's about the chat with your mates, it's about basic boy meets girl, or whatever. And just sharing those memories, and how many times, people: 'Yeah, I was at that gig! I remember, yeah!'.

What is important to note here is that why all this may or may not be true it is expressly linked to business strategy. So Latham said that:

There will only be one performance of Paul Weller, or Christy Moore, or Tom Jones, and you were at it. That was you sharing time with that person. *That's what people pay a premium for.* (Latham 2009, emphasis mine)

He also spoke of Live Nation becoming a brand that was trusted to bring audiences that much sought after experience.

Importantly promoters know that the experience is based on full venues. So in evidence to a Culture, Media and Sport Committee enquiry into ticket touting, the CPA said that "the excitement generated at live concerts derives from full houses and the audience inside knowing that there are others outside who would love to trade places" (*Culture Media and Sport Committee* 2008, Ev. 16). Their chair, Rob Ballantine, told the Committee:

We are not a supply and demand industry. What we are trying to do is fill every venue and leave a small demand left over and hope that we can entice those people either to the next concert we are promoting, or the next tour that the band are doing. You would not enjoy a concert if you went along to Wembley Stadium and there were 10,000 people there because there would be no atmosphere. You have to generate full houses to keep the atmosphere going. It is a very, very careful balance that we do, and we keep those ticket prices low and affordable to ensure that those venues are full and full of fans who want to spend their money on concerts, want to go to ten concerts a year and not two concerts because it is costing them £250 a ticket. (Culture Media and Sport Committee 2008, Ev. 22)

And in interview Geoff Ellis (2011) explained how important it was that in its early years T in The Park moved to sell out status: "We want to be selling out, we want [...] if you sell out, people aspire to get a ticket, and it self-perpetuates, really".

So there you have it – the experience is only really an experience if the house is full and part of the audience's appreciation is built on the fact that other people are being denied the experience that you are having. This helps to explain the antipathy of many promoters to touts. If their business model is one which is based on some people *not* being able to attend, the secondary market says that experience can *always* be got – albeit often at a considerable price.

There are also two other points worth making here. The first of which is that it's very hard to disagree with the sorts of arguments that promoters are putting forward. It's almost a form of commonsense that live music can be a life affirming experience. But we need to remember that the economics of live music are based around the commercial exploitation of that experience.

But it's not so long ago that articles were appearing in the British press asking why on earth people went to gigs – overcrowded, bad sound, expensive, etc. (see, for example, Barber 1996; Simpson 2000). Now facilities might have improved, but going to a gig still involves the audience taking a certain amount of risk. It could still well be crap.

Secondly, the idea that live music is the definitive musical experience because it is capable of reproduction is an interesting one. Because we are still told by various sellers of audio equipment that the ultimate experience of popular music is that of listening to recordings at home on the latest hi fi equipments (see, for example, *Sony Ericsson* 2007; *Ipod Outlet* n.d.). Perhaps the ideological victory of live music has been aided by the rise of the MP3 – perhaps the first sound carrier *not* to suggest that it was a superior listening experience to its predecessors.

CONCLUSION

As noted at the beginning the inspiration for this paper was Marx's idea that the ruling ideas at any time are those of the ruling class. I've assumed that in the case of the contemporary music industries that means promoters and I examined their ideology via their self-description as risk-takers, the ways they can minimise risk and through their view of the product they are selling as being that of an experience. And I do believe that these are important things to understand if we want to understand the state of the music industries in 2011.

Meanwhile, in the longer term promoters have to be ensured that they don't kill the goose that laid the golden egg by overpricing and taking too many risks. If we think back to an ideology of the 1960s where artists and audiences were pitted against "The Man" – then that Man is now more likely to be a promoter than a record company. And if a lot of what promoters told us appears to be simple commonsense, then perhaps they've already won the ideological battle and the ruling ideas of this epoch are those espoused by promoters. For us punters the fact that our passion is a commodity is not necessarily news but it does mean that we have to be

careful to ensure that the value of being there does not mean that we are taken for a ride, ideological or otherwise.

ENDNOTES

- 1. Or the fact that in 2002 Paul McCartney earned US\$2.2 million from recordings, another 2.2 from publishing and 64.9 from concerts (Connolly and Krueger 2006).
- ². Ellis also noted that this compares with ticketing which he thought was a 20% business. Such figures help to explain why the world's biggest concert promoter, Live Nation, acquired the world's biggest ticket agency, Ticketmaster.

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